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ABSTRACT

This digest addresses the history, motives, key players, potential effects, and future of the graduate student unionization movement. The course of faulty unionization efforts is intricately tied to that of graduate student unions. Graduate student employees have attempted to unionize at both public and private college and universities. There has been a significant increase in the use of teaching assistants since 1975, and the use of graduate students as instructors has tightened the already competitive academic job market. Graduate students and part-time faculty fear that there will not be space for them in the permanent, full-time, tenured positions of academia, and many look to unionization as a means to secure their current positions and force universities to acknowledge the dilemma. The issues that typically arise are whether graduate students can be considered employees, and whether unionization is appropriate for graduate students. These decisions vary by state. Within institutions, most opposition has come from full-time tenured faculty. To date, few studies have been conducted on the effects of graduate student unions, but universities without graduate assistant unions and with heavy use of part-time faculty and graduate students have experienced stagnation in full-time faculty salaries. The future of graduate student unionization is uncertain, although in public higher education institutions, the path appears to be widening for such unions. Graduate student unions at private institutions face additional complications, and the issues related to these unions merit further consideration. (Contains 14 references.) (SLD)

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# GRADUATE STUDENT UNIONIZATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION.

By *Lori J. Cavell*

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# GRADUATE STUDENT UNIONIZATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION.

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**Introduction**

The debate over whether graduate student unions have a place within higher education is heating up on campuses. The suitability of collective bargaining for graduate students is the contested issue. Union representatives are on one side of the negotiation table arguing that graduate assistants are employees and deserve collective bargaining rights like other employee groups. Most faculty and administrators are on the other side, asserting that graduate assistants are primarily students whose responsibilities need not be governed by collective bargaining agreements.

**Graduate Students' Quest for Unionization**

Graduate students entered the unionization movement in 1969 when students at the University of Wisconsin-Madison campus gained union status. Nevertheless, the rally for graduate students to unionize did not spread until the late 1980s. Within the last eight years, large numbers of graduate assistants (GAs) have organized and struck for recognition. What caused this rise in activity? The main reasons are the following:

- There has been a significant increase in the use of teaching assistants at colleges and universities. Since 1975, the number of faculty members who are also graduate students rose 35 percent (AAUP, 1995). This growth is largely a result of cost reduction efforts in higher education institutions. At large research institutions, for example, graduate students are increasingly seen as a source of cheap labor and are relied upon as part-time teaching assistants or as a main source of undergraduate instructors (Nelson, 1995). As a consequence, the nature of the graduate students' role has changed to more closely resemble that of the faculty, while their compensation has remained far below that of a professor (Aronowitz, 1998).

- The use of graduate students as instructors has further tightened the already competitive academic job market. Graduate assistants and part-time faculty fear that there will not be space for them in the permanent, full-time, tenured faculty positions of academia. Many look to unionization as a means to securing their current positions and as a way to force universities to acknowledge their dilemma (Aronowitz, 1998; Barba, 1994).

GA unionization advocates assert that "until we can reverse the chronic disinvestment in higher education and restore tenured positions as the norm, it is likely that universities will increase their exploitation of cheap labor as student enrollments expand over the next decade" (AAUP, 1995). In the long run, scholars predict that use of graduate students and part-time faculty will result in fewer full-time jobs available to would-be professors, and a decrease in the quality of education delivered (Chase, 2000; Vaughn, 1998; AAUP, 1995, Joseph & Curtiss, 1997; and, Sharnoff, 1993).

**The Other Side of the Debate**

According to the opponents (mainly university faculty and administrations) of GA unionization, graduate students are not employees and are not entitled to unionization or benefits. Students work as part of their training or financial aid packages, and this experience supplements their education. GA union adversaries insist that graduate student unionization will do more harm than good, and voice many concerns.

University administrators fear that graduate student unions will negatively affect graduate student and university relations, cause strikes and interruptions in education, and reduce the role that non-union members have in the formation and delivery of education. They also have economic concerns. Administrators fear that increases in salary and fringe benefits won by graduate student unions could lead to increased student tuition. Other worries are that it would interfere with the free exchange of ideas, causing economic considerations to replace academic ones (Barba, 1994) (See Vaughn, 1998, for a response to these concerns).

Faculty share the concerns of the administrators. This comes as a surprise to those who watched the faculty unionization movements of the 1970s. Sometimes the very professors that once fought for their own unions now oppose graduate assistant unionization. One scholar speculates that faculty members may question motives for graduate student unions, predict a loss of comradeship and collegiality, and fear the usurpation of faculty responsibilities as well as increased rivalry (Sharnoff, 1993). It is difficult to assess the validity or prevalence of such attitudes.

**Where is all the action?**

The National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) and state labor relations boards are charged with the task of deciding whether or not graduate students can be considered employees. Public and private organizations have been viewed differently by the NLRB (See Streitz et al, 1997). Since graduate student employment is governed by state labor laws, each state's graduate student groups must fight the battle in their own state (Joseph & Curtiss, 1997). As a result, the type and course of the battle varies.

Graduate student movements at both public and private institutions have been active. Like faculty unionization efforts, GA organizations have been enhanced by partnerships with the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), the National Education Association (NEA), and in some cases the United Auto Workers (UAW). The following are key achievements in the partnerships' struggles for graduate student unions across the United States:

- The first graduate assistants' union was formed in 1969 at the University of Wisconsin-Madison campus (Barba 1994). (For a list of all recognized unions and their organized labor affiliations see Julius, April 1999).
- In 1992, after a series of failed attempts to negotiate a contract at University of California at Berkeley, the Graduate Student Employees struck for recognition (Barba 1994).
- In 1993, the State University of New York (SUNY) Graduate Student Employee Union was awarded its first contract with the State of New York (Barba 1994).
- In 1995, Yale's Graduate Employee Student Organization (GESO) withheld student grades in order to force recognition of their union. In 1997 The NLRB filed charges against Yale for illegal retaliation against graduate students attempting to unionize (Joseph and Curtiss, 1997). However, the university still does not recognize GESO (Aronowitz, 1998).
- In April, 2000, graduate students who teach, grade papers and conduct research at New York University (NYU), a private university, were granted the legal right to form a union by the NLRB. This ruling could open the door for other private institutions (Leatherman, 2000).

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- During litigation over graduate students' efforts to organize at NYU, the NLRB Regional Director ruled that graduate students are employees. NYU appealed that ruling to the NLRB in Washington. On October 31, 2000, the NLRB affirmed the Regional Director's finding.
- In the year 2000, there are unionization recognition battles in Illinois, Michigan, Connecticut, California and other states.

**What impact will graduate student unions have?**
Though there is much speculation on both sides of the debate, to date few studies of the effects of graduate student unions have been conducted.

In support of graduate student unions, Aronowitz observed that universities without graduate assistant unions and with heavy use of part-time faculty and graduate assistants experienced stagnation in full-time faculty salaries (Aronowitz, 1998). Perhaps GA unions will reduce this effect. Another study found that graduate student unions have not damaged professor-graduate student relations (Hewitt, 1999). The study surveyed faculty members at five universities that have had graduate student unions for at least four years. Approximately 90 percent of the respondents claimed that mentoring relationships, the free exchange of ideas, and the faculty advisory role had not suffered because of the unions.

Yet, unionization is not without negative consequences for union members as evidenced by the University of Massachusetts at Amherst and the University of California Berkeley cases. University of Massachusetts graduate students' stipends remained static for two years while contract negotiations over other issues were conducted (See http://www.yale.edu/opa/gradschool/faq.html#section4). At UC Berkeley, graduate assistants have not received an increase in seven years also due to lengthy contract negotiations (See http://www.yale.edu/opa/gradschool/faq.html#section4). The lessons these cases offer should be heeded, so as to avoid replication of such situations.

**Guidelines to Address the Future of Graduate Student Unionization**
The future of graduate student unionization is uncertain. At the present, the path appears to be widening at public and private (though at a slower rate) higher education institutions. As this trend continues, graduate students interested in unionizing, state agency officials charged with negotiating contracts, and administrators of universities involved in the unionization debate, search for guidance. Until more research is available, these groups would be wise to pursue two avenues: 1) colleagues who have already tackled these issues, and 2) the literature on existing graduate student union contracts and the related struggles.

Groups interested in unionizing can look to union activists at organized schools, the Directory of Graduate Student Employee Bargaining Agents and Organizations (Lanzerotti et al, 1995) for histories and contract summaries of GA unions, the National Association of Graduate-Professional Students (NAGPS) [http://www.nagps.org/] for information on graduate and professional student groups at all stages of development, and the Coalition of Graduate Employee Unions (CGEU) [http://www.CGEU.org/] for advice.

Good resources for administrators and faculty are the following:

- A Chronicle of Higher Education Handbook entitled "Faculty Collective Bargaining" (1976) delineates a twelve-step process, beginning with organizing and concluding with the administration of a contract, which can be helpful to administrators, faculty and graduate students seeking to understand the collective bargaining process.
- Barba's 1994 article "The Unionization Movement" examines the contracts at the Universities of Florida, Michigan, Oregon, and Wisconsin, as well as Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey. Barba's analysis of these collective bargaining agreements reveals a number of similarities which may be incorporated as the foundation of future contract negotiations (Barba, 1994).
- Cary Nelson's (1995) article frames the current strife over the graduate student as apprentice or employee. Nelson outlines a twelve-step program to help faculty, graduate students and administrators address the key issues. Solutions are also offered.

These resources, publications, and precedents can guide the higher education community as graduate student unionization efforts hit campuses everywhere. Unquestionably, the graduate employee unionization issue and the ensuing struggles should be watched closely. The quality of teaching and employment within higher education is at stake.

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